

Comparative Theology and the Practice of Advaita Vedānta



I. The Elements of the Experiment

Theology after Vedānta is an experiment in the practice of comparative theology. It proceeds by the cooperation of three distinct activities. First, it is a study of that Indian system of exegetical theology known as the Advaita (Non-Dualist) Vedānta,¹ which flourished most richly after the theologian Śāṅkara, who lived in the early 8th century CE. Advaita is a tradition of sacred and theological texts and commentaries on them, as well as arguments about texts, and the practice of meditation with texts—all of these making possible and necessary post-textual philosophical claims, and culminating in events of realization to which the hitherto indispensable texts are no longer primary. Given the enormous attention, legitimate but exaggerated, that has been paid to Advaita as an epistemological and philosophical system, it has been necessary to engage extensively in a study of that school of thought in its commentarial and theological components.

Second, this book is an exercise in (Christian) comparative theology, as this theology is (re)thought and (re)written after a close reading of Advaita. As such, *Theology after Vedānta* is an experiment in that writing, one which has as its goal the delineation of a better way for theologians to do comparative work: a way that is more practical; more engaged in texts and in the

concreteness of multiple theological traditions; more attentive to how learning, writing and true knowledge follow from patient reading; more cognizant of the location of faith statements and realizations not only as prior to theological activity, but also as continually recomposed in light of and according to the requirements of that activity.

Third, and consequently, this book explores the tension between the study of Advaita and the construction of a (Christian) comparative theology, as this is mediated by a reflective reappropriation of reading as a primary practical avenue of knowledge. It is about the array of smaller and larger practices which are parts of that disciplined reading, and about the realizations that become possible and necessary for the theologian who ventures to read carefully in a tradition distinct from her or his own.

This book will therefore attract a variety of readers, including those who may be tempted to read selectively. The interpretation of Advaita which occupies Chapters 2, 3, and 4 breaks new ground in its insistence that we understand Advaita primarily as a theological tradition, and it may be of interest to readers who are not at all concerned with comparative theology. The inquiry into comparison as the practice of intelligent comparative reading, presented chiefly in this chapter and Chapter 5, may be of interest to those curious about the possible uses of reading theory in comparative religious studies, and to those who actually do comparative work; the presentation of a better, textual foundation for comparative theology and of the implied reconstruction of theological practice in general, presented chiefly in Chapter 5, will be of special interest to theologians, including those who specialize in reflection on religions other than their own. But as a whole the book addresses those who are interested in Advaita *and* theology *and* reading *and* comparative work; it is properly understood only when these subsidiary concerns are not separated.

In its broader frame the composition of this book reflects on how I, though not an Advaitin, nevertheless chose to become a reader of Advaita, to engage in that reading with some successes and some failures, and consequently to reflect on that

reading and on my enduring though partially overcome exteriority to Advaita; this reflection is highlighted in order to bring to prominence the issues that need to be faced in a rereading and rewriting of my own Christian tradition. Even Chapters 2, 3 and 4, which focus on Advaita and strive for a fair reading of certain Advaita texts, are composed consciously within the margins of my comparative theological interests—even if these are only implicit in those chapters—for the sake of the composition of a better account of how one rereads one's home theological tradition—in my case, the Roman Catholic—after a serious engagement in the reading of another tradition, in this case, the Advaita. In those middle chapters, the issues of the text that is read (Chapter 2), the truth of that text (Chapter 3), and its reader (Chapter 4), are respectively taken up; each issue recurs in the three major sections of Chapter 5, where the earlier chapters' theological and comparative concerns come explicitly to the fore. Even in those middle chapters, therefore, a privileged objective position outside traditions, from which he or she might compare and contrast them objectively, has neither been sought nor attained; this is so, even if at the same time the inevitable subjective factors have been submitted to the discipline of attentive reading. This book intends neither the acquisition nor defense of a privileged objective stance, especially if the acquisition of such would entail the expectation that the Advaita and/or Christian traditions could be located within a broader field of intelligibility, which they would be thought to exemplify. The reader is therefore requested to keep in mind the Indological, theological and literary concerns which appear at least implicitly on every page of this book, and is invited to share with the author the task of keeping distinct though productively cooperative these inseparably and mutually determinative concerns.

Though *Theology after Vedānta* addresses a wide range of issues, these issues are focused through one particular example, a selective reading of certain Advaita texts and a reconsideration of certain Catholic theological texts thereafter. As a practical exercise and limited experiment this book does not begin with general issues, and does not conclude to a general theory of religion or comparison; generalizations will be made only

cautiously, even reluctantly. Instead it seeks more modestly to inscribe reflection on such issues within the specific boundaries of one particular case study, in order to illuminate the universal from a studiously and stubbornly particular stance.

In this chapter I introduce the chief features and topics which require balancing in the interplay of the specific and the general, the engagement in an "other," and reappraisal of one's "home" tradition: comparative theology (section II), the theory of practice (III), and Advaita Vedānta (IV). In the light of those components taken together, I conclude by previewing the rest of the book as a commitment to the practice of reading and the important tensions that derive from a permanent commitment to that practice and a recognition of the understanding that is derived from it (V).

II. Comparative Theology

Since every issue taken up in this book will be filtered through the concerns of comparative theology, it is important to describe this project and to distinguish it from the related endeavors of theology, Indology, and the study of religion in its various forms.²

1. Calling Comparison "Theological"

The kind of comparison in which I engage bears with it a set of particularly theological problems. Theology, to characterize it in a non-technical fashion, is distinct from the study of religion (with which it overlaps in many of its procedures) because theology is an inquiry carried on by believers who allow their belief to remain an explicit and influential factor in their research, analysis and writing. Believing theologians are (usually) members of believing communities, and have those communities as their primary audiences, whether or not the bulk of their writing is addressed to them. With their communities, they believe in some transcendent (perhaps supernatural) reality, the possibility of and (usually fact of) a normative revelation, and in the need to make practical decisions and life choices which

have a bearing on salvation. Theologians do their work with an awareness of and concern for these beliefs, and with a desire to defend and preserve them, even if at one or another moment they may have to question, recontextualize and finally reformulate them in modes of discourse quite different from those already familiar to the community.

These features remain operative throughout theologians' comparative study as well. Comparativists who are theologians are likely to believe that transcendence, revelation, truth and salvation are real concerns, not simply components of the texts which talk about them; that they are concerns likely to affect not only explicit participants in the religious traditions which revere those texts, but also scholars who might read those texts seriously. Two consequences follow.

First, comparative theologians cannot be content simply with cataloguing different traditions' views on these concerns, or with understanding how certain texts make sense to certain communities, or how "their" texts are like or unlike "our" texts, should the allegiances "our" and "their" survive scrutiny. As theologians, they insist on asking further questions about the truth of their own and other communities' knowledge of God. Unwilling to reduce their own tradition's faith claims to mere information which does not require a response, comparative theologians likewise refuse to reduce other traditions' faith to mere, safe information. Knowledge, taken seriously, changes the lives of the knowers; even if research reveals or creates a series of contradictions which make life more difficult for the believing comparativist, to pass over these in silence is only a short-term solution which manages to leave out much of what is most interesting in comparisons, the specific, "thick" details which constitute the substance of communities' religious beliefs and their continuing vitality.

Second, comparative theologians operate within boundaries marked by the tension between a necessary vulnerability to truth as one might find it and be affected by it in the materials studied, and loyalty to truth as one has already found it, lives it, and hopes according to it. Comparative theologians do not wish to reduce the studied traditions to mere, disposable information to

be used as they see fit; this reduction would fundamentally distort the other, by depriving it of its imposing structures, its transformative power and its claims to universality—the very features which should most interest the theologian. But there can be no plan by which the theologian can relocate the comparison and the compared religious texts in an arena where the operative principle is a universal, exceptionless respect for all religions as equally true; even were such a relocation possible, it would be likely to devalue from the start one's own community's beliefs about itself—for the sake of comparison, the comparative venture would be shorn of its properly theological character.

2. *Calling Theology "Comparative"*

We need also to admit from the start that this project begins with a particular, peculiar, kind of theological confidence, the view that a faith tradition can claim the world entirely and universally, leaving no part of it unaccounted for, while yet simultaneously and effectively confronting itself uncompromisingly with the particular and stubborn demands that a world rich in particular and irreducible traditions and their beliefs places on the theologian.

In choosing to label *Theology after Vedānta* an experiment in "comparative theology," I therefore use the word "theology" advisedly, endowing it with an attentiveness to what is often unaccounted for or entirely marginalized in a tradition's theology, the fact of its serious theological competitors in other religions. Though I must distinguish the project undertaken here from theology as it is generally understood in the Christian context, I am tempted to call it simply "an experiment in theology," leaving aside the marker "comparative." "Comparative theology" is not meant merely to mark another specialization within theology, nor is it merely heir to the older "theology of religions" and missiology disciplines. It is a project which, though begun modestly and with small examples, intends a rethinking of every theological issue and a rereading of every theological text. But as long as comparative study is not the norm, it would

not be of much help to reserve the name “theology” for this way of doing theology.

One may also concede that “comparative” may not be the right word to suggest what actually goes on in the reading of texts and therefore in this book, where the engaged reader is “inscribed” into an ever more complexly composed context, in order to write after and out of it. The distance one might normally associate with comparison is lacking; the images of visual assessment often associated with comparing—looking at things together—are inappropriate. Perhaps another Latin word, “collectio”—“reading-together”—might be rehabilitated for this purpose. But for now, “comparative theology” serves to indicate my intention to inscribe within the Christian theological tradition theological texts from outside it, and to (begin to) write Christian theology only out of that newly composed context.

3. Comparative Theology in Relation to Other Disciplines

The nature of comparative theology can be clarified by noting its relation to two presupposed but distinct disciplines: “Indology,” as one instance from among a wider range of area- or culture- or religion-specific studies often termed “area studies,” and the comparative study of religion.

Good comparative study, including good comparative theology, of course depends heavily on the ability of the comparativist to articulate a viable understanding of the “other,” in which the encountered “other” is not manufactured to fit the comparativist’s prejudices and expectations. The comparative theologian must achieve a certain distance from her or his own starting point, in order to be able to learn from another tradition by understanding it on its own terms, and in a way that can never be entirely predicated on the expectations of one’s home tradition, because it reformulates those expectations regarding the home tradition.

This is why credible Indological study is necessary for my project. A credible use of Advaita in a comparative project depends on a prior credible reading of Advaita even if, as conceded above, this reading is not accomplished entirely apart

from the comparative agenda. Though in an exemplary and not a comprehensive fashion, the resources of Indology have been crucial to this book. And though it cannot be labeled an Indological monograph, it would also be inaccurate to suggest that only certain parts of it—Chapters 2, 3 and 4—are Indologically informed: the very project of a “theology after Vedānta” occurs due to the reformulation of my theological concerns by engagement in the study of Advaita and its Mīmāṃsā predecessor (about which I will say more below). As my study is Theological, so is it Indological.

The distinction between comparative theology and the range of disciplines collected under the title of “the study of religion” points to the fact that comparative theology, like theology in general, is invested with the dimension of faith. The faith of the inquirer cannot be separated from the faith claims of the inquirer’s community; this faith is explicitly at issue in the comparative exercise, as much as is a concern for the truth that may be emerge and claim the scholar more or less profoundly during the project of comparison. While scholars committed to the study of religion are frequently enough believers who are committed to certain traditional formulations of religious truth, such commitment does not need to be explicitly an issue in their writing; often scholars devise ways of distancing their professional work from their personal religious roots.

One may distinguish comparative theology and the study of religion also by their goals. The aim of the study of religion, in the most general terms, is an understanding of religion in its various forms and actualizations, and the accomplishment of this understanding by a methodology which enables one to study and talk about religion(s) comprehensively and productively. Particular studies of particular religious texts, symbols, and practices are often undertaken with the announced goal of using them to understand better the larger phenomenon of religion which they exemplify.

Comparative theology differs in its resistance to generalizations about religion, its commitment to the demands of one or another tradition, and its goal of a reflective retrieval, after comparison, of the comparativist’s (acknowledged) own community’s

beliefs in order to restate them more effectively. In keeping with a concern that is central to both Advaita and (my Roman Catholic) Christian tradition, my emphasis on the local and particular resists the reduction of the two religious traditions compared, or of the comparative reading of them, to examples of how "religion" works or of how religions are to be studied.

Nevertheless, conclusions about religion and comparison can be drawn from this study, and perhaps there will be many. My point is to emphasize from the beginning that any such conclusions need to be carefully elicited from the particularities of this material, and composed in such a way as to invite the reader to engage the material directly and comprehensively, for the sake of a consequent reappropriation of her or his theological presuppositions and commitments.

III. Comparative Theology as Practical Knowledge

Theological comparison is therefore a practice in which one must purposefully and perseveringly engage; more specifically, one of the most important forms of this practice is the activity of reading attentively. Since reading is the practice which both Advaita and Christian theologians have usually undertaken, it is this practice of reading which will occupy us here; and while it cannot be adequately anticipated by a theory about it, its key dimensions—its relation to theory, its temporality, its treatment of particularity, its expectations regarding the transformation of the practitioner—must be understood if it is to be unhindered in its performance.

As reading, comparative theology entails a combination of activity with an incrementally progressive understanding of that activity; as such, it resists labelling as either "mere practice" and "mere theory."³ Moreover, the understanding is integral to the practice; comparative theology wishes to perform and understand its practice without making the unnecessary and inept claim that it thereby supplements unexamined religious practices with their previously unarticulated theoretical framework, or that it explicates and succeeds in making available presuppositions known better to the observer than to the participants in a religion. While comparative theology must be distinguished

from religious practice, and while it necessarily enters into a critical, intelligent relationship to the materials of the compared traditions, both the familiar and the new, its achievement of this relationship is a continually provisional and practical arrangement in which the comparativist engages in activities—theoretical, practical, interpretive, personal, communal—which are shaped in negotiation with the comparable activities of the communities which are being studied and compared.⁴

As a practical endeavor, comparison occurs in time, over time; it takes time. Were we to abolish the temporal nature of comparison as a practical discourse, we would lose a crucial factor which makes available to us the significance of the practice we undertake when we perform comparisons.⁵ Unlike the (scientific) practice of model-making, an understanding which subsists in the temporality of practice remains attentive to and participant in that shifting set of relationships and procedures, the tensions between the said and implicit, the ordered and disordered, which constitutes practical life. It focuses, as Pierre Bourdieu puts it, on practices' "temporal structure, direction, and rhythm [which are] *constitutive* of their meaning."⁶

Committed to the reinterpretation and rewriting of theology *after* Advaita, this book is also committed to highlighting, taking into account and taking advantage of the time it takes to work through an unfamiliar body of texts, with all the gradually cumulative effects that process has on one's practical (re)organization of previously and newly familiar concepts and commitments. The writing of this book, and by extension its proper reading, are significant as activities one learns from, not merely on the grounds of the conclusions thereby possibly generated. As Chapter 4 indicates in regard to Advaita, the value of patient reading is realized primarily within the person engaged in its practice, and by extension within a community of, or in dialogue with, such persons. Though here too distances may be usefully preserved, the transformation of the comparativist—and her or his resistance to transformation—in the acts of reading and writing are therefore necessary topics of analysis in a comparative project which takes practice seriously.⁷

The perfection of the deeper and often unrecognized ways by which the experienced person relates to the world and continually revises that relationship is the goal of Advaita, because only in that accomplishment is the tension between doing and knowing resolved. To do/know Advaita entails becoming—or being made into—a certain kind of person who makes distinctions in certain ways, thereby transforming all of her or his relations. Analogously, the Christian tradition recognizes in the appropriation of religious knowledge a transformation of one's way of acting, explicitly and in more enduring habitual patterns: what one might term the complex event of conversion. Comparative theology therefore attends closely to the ways in which comparativists' engagement in their materials and response to the new demands articulated during a comparative project reconfigure their religious and theological understanding.

Lee Yearley's recent *Mencius and Aquinas*,⁸ an exemplary work which confronts the problems of comparison and which skillfully finds an intermediate path between abstraction and the undigested accumulation of detail, helps us to extend our thinking about comparison as a reflective practice.⁹ He identifies three kinds of theory: first, primary theories, which "provide explanations that allow people to predict, plan and cope with the normal problems the world presents;" second, secondary theories, "which differ from culture to culture, [and] are usually built from primary theories in order to explain peculiar or distressing occurrences;"¹⁰ third, practical theories, which "often work on the ideas primary theory produces and can link with notions of secondary theory." Practical theory "presents a more theoretical account than does primary theory and stays closer to normal phenomena than does secondary theory. Moreover, the aim is to guide people toward full actualization and therefore concepts like virtue, obligation, and disposition are utilized. Much of practical theory, then, concerns what we call ethics."¹¹ In the conclusion of his study Yearley returns to this distinction, again stressing the "in-between" status of practical theories which "aim at a more conceptually precise ordering of human experience than does primary theory; but they stay far

closer to the particular, often murky, phenomena that make up much human life than does secondary theory."¹²

Though Yearley's focus on practical theory is finely tuned to the demands of his study of virtue, the notion of a form of understanding which is both concrete and productive of generalization, theoretical and practical, complements our previous comments on practical knowledge and highlights comparative theology as a reflective practice which develops new understandings while preserving the particularities of religious traditions' discourses about themselves.

Yearley's comments on analogy and imagination helpfully mark the balance the comparativist needs to maintain. Staying close to his materials, both respecting and honestly critiquing the ethical positions of Aquinas and Mencius, Yearley rejects univocity, whereby differences are overlooked in order to focus on similarities, and equivocality, whereby differences are allowed to block any discussion of perceived though elusive similarities in the materials compared; neither univocity nor equivocality helps us to assess and articulate what is actually learned in a comparison.¹³ Yearley seeks a middle ground on which to treat more adequately materials which can be subjected to comparison—i.e., which are neither identical nor completely different—and concludes to an analogical mode of thought: "Through analyzing the ordered relationships among analogical terms we can preserve both clarity and textured diversity, and thereby fully articulate similarities in differences and differences in similarities."¹⁴ This process involves "ongoing operations" and "continuing performances," and "does not rest on applying a static structure or a fixed theory to material;"¹⁵ rather, it is rooted in the ability and refined judgment of a skillful comparativist who knows how to make good comparisons and what to do with them:

... I think it clear that comparative studies of human flourishings must engage in a process that necessarily involves us in a form of imagining, in the utilization of the analogical imagination. To say we must use the imagination is not also to say that standards dissolve; it is not to join forces with some of the more radical forms of humanis-

tic scholarship. Imaginative processes involve standards for judging interpretations and rules that can be followed well or badly . . . They depend, for example, on the interpreter's sensibilities, they may evoke rather than demonstrate, and they produce inventions . . . these inventions have the power to give a new form to our experiences. The imaginative redescription produced challenges our normal experience of the contemporary worlds in which we live and of the often distant worlds we study.¹⁶

Though Yearley's work is not explicitly theological, it contributes to a model for comparative theology. It too operates in the same back-and-forth movement between particularity and theory, and is unwilling to surrender either of these; it too depends on the educated imaginative act of the comparativist (comparative theologian) who is transformed by the process of comparison and thus enabled to compare sensitively and to make sense out of particular acts of comparison.

Nevertheless, the present book differs in several ways from Yearley's. First, though practical and ethical considerations are essential to the Advaita material I will be considering, a wider range of epistemological, ontological and cosmological claims are prominent, and all of these involve refinements of reasoning which are distinguishable from ethical judgments and discourse. I will be more concerned than Yearley to trace the path back and forth from practical to secondary theories, and to assess the practical role of the latter within Advaita and in regard to outsiders who may read Advaita and potentially be claimed by it.

Second, Advaita invests heavily in the interpretation of texts, and develops its practical theories through the reflective practices of exegesis. It dwells within a world of texts; though it ventures beyond texts, it does so only through and after them, while justifying these excursions only on textual grounds. Advaita's textual investment has compelled me to focus more narrowly than Yearley on the problem of how believers compose, read, and teach their own religious and theological texts, and how outsiders who are believers in another tradition are to read and write about other communities' texts in relation to theirs, adjusting the margins of both in the process.

Third, while Yearley's stress on the skill and imagination of the comparativist is consonant with my own theological concern about the faith and community of the comparativist, his comments on the issues of faith, truth and community are minimal. I raise these questions more explicitly, exploring the tensions between what one reads and what one writes, between what one believes and how one lives. Consequently, my work is more concerned than Yearley's with the theological implications of the comparison undertaken and with the question of how the tensions created by comparative work can be resolved, in the comparativist and in her or his community.

In the preceding pages I have sketched the contours of a form of comparative theology which remains close to the particularities of the traditions studied, which maintains the prominent position of the practical issues of faith and commitment which characterize theological investigations, and which generalizes in the sense that as a member of a larger community, the comparativist as theologian is required to recount for that community both the details and implications of the comparative project in order to engage the community in the practice or its results. In the remaining sections of this chapter I further specify these indications by attention to the Advaita tradition as a practice of exegesis and commentary (IV), and by a sketch of how a focus on texts, reading and the identity of the reader shape this experiment in theology after Advaita Vedānta (V).

IV. Advaita, Text and Commentary

The following introduction to the Advaita theological tradition, to be amply filled out in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, begins with an overview of the texts relevant to this study. I then situate Advaita, first by examining its understanding of itself as a coherent, organically integrated tradition of commentaries, and then by exploring the significance of the fact that Advaita is at its core an exegetical system, and therefore is heir to the ritual exegesis of the older Mīmāṃsā school of ritual exegesis. I will show that Advaita is fundamentally a practice rather different from the philosophy it has generally been conceived to be, that

it is closer to “theology” than “philosophy,” and closer to “scriptural theology” than “philosophical theology.” Thus characterized, Advaita places a different and in many ways more arduous, yet practicable set of demands on the interested practitioner, the interested hearer and student, whom throughout I describe as the “reader.” Advaita thus portrayed loses some of the universality attributed to philosophy; but it also becomes more and not less accessible to the unauthorized but gradually implicated outsider, the comparativist, the theologian who is willing to be (re)educated by the Advaita texts.

1. A Brief Overview of the Advaita as a Commentarial Tradition

“Vedānta” refers generally to a body of concepts and a number of schools of thought which claim as their primary referent and authority the Sanskrit-language upaniṣads, a group of texts from the middle and late Vedic period (after 800 BCE). In the upaniṣads speculation about the orthodox rituals of ancient India was increasingly accompanied by speculation on the nature of the world in which ritual is efficacious, on human nature, and on the nature of the “higher” or post-mortem reality which renders human experience ultimately significant. Inquiries into, and discourses about, the vital breath (*prāṇa*), the self (*ātman*), and the corresponding spiritual and cosmic principle, *Brahman*, are prominent in the upaniṣads. These upaniṣadic explorations proceed by experiment, by question and answer, by exposition and summation; in their rough texture they replicate earlier oral debates and inquiries. The older upaniṣads appear to be only partially homogenized collections of yet older debates and teachings; they are not presented as single works by single authors, and are not complete systematizations. Consequently, Vedānta’s theological appropriations of the upaniṣads are marked from the start as acts of careful reading and constructive systematizations which go beyond what is in the texts.

Bādarāyaṇa’s *Uttara Mīmāṃsā Sūtras*¹⁷ (perhaps 4th or 5th century CE) is a set of 555 brief, terse aphorisms (*sūtras*)¹⁸ which intend just such an organization of upaniṣadic speculations into a system of thought focused on Brahman, the absolute and tran-

scendent, cosmic and microcosmic principle of life; as interior, Brahman is occasionally equated with that Self/self known as the Ātman. Recalling and revising the views of various earlier and probably contemporary Vedānta teachers, Bādarāyaṇa attempts a descriptive systematization of the upaniṣads, a regularization of their meaning and identification of their main tenets.

His UMS may be divided into two connected projects. In the first half, he organizes the upaniṣads according to their main topic, Brahman (UMS I.1.1–2), and the right reading of texts about Brahman (UMS I.1.3–I.4.) To this he appends an articulation of the implied metaphysics and epistemology of Vedānta, in response to objections portrayed as those posed by other schools of thought (UMS II). In the second though perhaps older half of the UMS, Bādarāyaṇa inquires into the proper regulation of knowledge about Brahman in meditation (UMS III.1–3) as this is practiced by the right people (UMS III.4), and concludes by describing the fruits of meditation and the way in which these fruits are enjoyed by the deceased meditator. (UMS IV)¹⁹

Bādarāyaṇa's key interpretive judgment is that the upaniṣads describe Brahman in two ways: positively, as possessed of qualities (*saḡuṇa*), and negatively, as beyond all qualities (*nirguṇa*). According to the former portrayal, Brahman may be imagined as distinct from the meditator; according to the latter, even the distinction between Brahman and the meditator is only a practical, provisional qualification. Though it is not possible to determine completely the nature of Bādarāyaṇa's system, it thus seems to preserve, though without a complete reconciliation, several of the possible versions of the Brahman-self relationship; in turn, it remains vulnerable to further determination.

Advaita, the school of Vedānta which first took form as a tradition of commentary on Bādarāyaṇa's sūtras, sought to provide the required further determination and to resolve the questions related to Brahman by a more exact and final reading of the texts in question.²⁰ Among the schools of Vedānta, it is distinguished by its consistent and thorough dependence on exegesis, its balance between social conservatism and a radical critique of orthodoxy, and its decision to center its systematiza-

tion of the complex upaniṣadic discourse on a belief in the final identity, non-dualism, of human self and the ultimate, non-qualified (nirguṇa) reality, Brahman. Though by no means the only school of Vedānta, Advaita's importance is attested by the fact of the many attacks on it by later schools of Vedānta.

Śaṅkara (8th century) is the most prominent of the Advaitins, and his *Bhāṣya* is the first extant commentary on the UMS.²¹ Though on most issues he sets forth a traditional interpretation of the UMS, and affords us access to the general Vedānta interpretation of the upaniṣads, he argues distinctively that there is a hierarchy in the teaching of the upaniṣads, the highest position being reserved for the teaching that Brahman alone is the final reality, devoid of anything exterior to itself; according to Śaṅkara, the texts which speak of distinction in Brahman and from Brahman are provisional, prior and intended for different purposes than those texts which deny distinction and which represent the final truth of the upaniṣads.

Śaṅkara's *Bhāṣya* on Bādarāyaṇa invited further commentaries which performed the necessary task of explaining the more difficult parts of the *Bhāṣya*, as well as extending it by refining its pronouncements and exploring its implications; these later commentaries were in turn objects of further commentary. Although the limited intention of this book precludes the much-needed project of a comprehensive study of the development of Advaita as a commentarial tradition,²² I draw on these later commentaries throughout, particularly the following:

1. Vācaspati Miśra (mid-9th century)—*Bhāmatī*
2. Amalānanda (13th)—*Vedāntakalpataru* (commentary on the *Bhāmatī*)
3. Appaya Dīkṣita (16th)—*Kalpataruparimala* (commentary on the *Vedāntakalpataru*.)
4. Ānandagiri (13th)—*Nyāyanirṇaya* (commentary on the *Bhāṣya*)
5. Govindānanda (end of 16th)—*Bhāṣyaratnaprabhā* (commentary on the *Bhāṣya*, drawing on the *Nyāyanirṇaya*)

6. Prakāśātman (13th)—*Śārīrakanyāyasaṃgraha* (a synthesis of issues at stake in the more ample commentaries)
7. Advaitānanda (17th)—*Brahmavidyābharaṇa* (a direct commentary on the *Bhāṣya*)

2. *Advaita as Text: The Flourishing of a Commentarial Tradition*

Commentaries are detailed, intricate, often difficult to use and often resistant to the questions modern readers pose to them; often, the older texts which were the subject of elucidation seem easier to follow than the commentarial elucidations of them. Though we may be sorely tempted to ignore the commentarial tradition in assessing the meaning of Advaita, this attempted shortcut is a serious error; we do better to slow down, to learn from and be educated by the commentaries.

If we wish to discover the most pedagogically and theologically appropriate way to read them, it makes sense to heed the announced intentions of the commentaries in question. The earliest texts are not illuminating in this regard: except for the highly important but decidedly laconic “*atha*,” the first word of the UMS,²³ Bādarāyaṇa gives us few clues as to how we are to use his text; Śaṅkara plunges directly into his analysis of the problem of ignorance and is no more helpful.

The later commentaries, however, announce their purpose in passages that are highly interesting and deserving of more careful reading than is usually afforded them. I turn therefore to the introductions of the three commentaries I will use throughout, those of Vācaspati, Amalānanda and Appaya Dīkṣita, in order to indicate how reading commentaries is essential to the project of learning Advaita.

In the verses which inaugurate the *Bhāmatī*, Vācaspati Mīśra maps out the spiritual horizon within which his commentary was written:

1. We reverence that immortal Brahman, immeasurable bliss and knowledge, which is manifest accompanied by the two-fold inexpressible ignorance, from which emanate ether, air, fire, water, and the earth, and from which come forth all of this, movable and unmovable, great and small;

2. The Vedas are his breath, the five elements his glance, all that is movable and unmovable his smile, the great dissolution his sleep;
3. To the Veda, eternal and associated with the six manifold imperishable auxiliaries, and to Bhava,²⁴ we render obeisance;
4. To Mārtaṇḍa, to Tilakaswāmin, and to Mahāgaṇapati, who are worthy of adoration by all and are the dispensers of all fulfillment, we render obeisance;
5. To Vyāsa, the secondary arranger, the composer of the *Brahmasūtras*, the embodiment of Lord Hari's power of knowledge, we render obeisance;
6. Rendering obeisance to that pure knowledge, Śaṅkara, the giver of abundant mercy, we analyze the clear yet deep commentary expounded by him;
7. Just as falling into the current of the Ganges refreshes waters stagnant near the roadside, proximity to the work of the master refreshes the lowly words composed by ourselves and others.²⁵

Thus portrayed, the project of commentary implies a close connection among four things: the world in its need and ignorance; the divine power (of Śiva); this power as manifest in knowledge and particularly in the Vedic scriptures; a tradition of authorized teachers of the Veda (*gurus*) down to Śaṅkara who is the principal teacher for the later commentators. The problem of this world is articulated as ignorance, in expectation that the remedy for it is that saving knowledge which is located in the Vedas and made available by proper teachers. The "emanations" of divine power, the unfolding of the world, and the elaboration of the "word" in Vedic speech—in its specific embodiment in certain texts and certain words, and the theories and positions of certain teachers—are parallel, interrelated structures. In practice, knowledge of the Vedic text affords the Advaitic reader access to the spiritual and cosmological components of reality: to know the Veda is to know the world; proper education constitutes the possibility of salvation.

The image Vācaspati uses in verse 7, of the waters falling into the Ganges, is striking: the commentaries are, as it were, above the *Bhāṣya*, and lie stagnant except when purified through a descent into that purifying source. If one can compose a commentary so carefully as to return the reader constantly to Śaṅkara, down into his *Bhāṣya*, then one has written pure, purifying Advaita; were a treatise to present itself as an improvement on or substitute for the *Bhāṣya*, its writing would be only a stagnant pool, a source of disease, confusion. The reader who reads/works through the commentaries is thus guided: commentaries are stagnant if taken as independent treatises, but become purifying waters when they lead us to Śaṅkara; like the holy guide who leads the pilgrim to the Ganges, good commentaries guide to the source the reader previously lost in mere words and mere debates.

Vācaspati's claim is amplified by Amalānanda in his commentary on the *Bhāmatī*, the *Vedāntakalpataru*. His opening verses affirm the characteristic Advaita positions that Brahman is knowledge, ignorance the problem to be faced, and scripture the path to knowledge:

1. That which is unknown by humans, which sustains the unsteadiness of this varied world, which is like the sky that foolish people think to be impure, which is manifest knowledge, expansive joy, the existent Brahman, the highest, which is manifest in hundreds of key scripture passages—to that we render obeisance!
2. By hundreds of rays of awareness he pierces that obscuring covering, the lack of awareness found in the interior space of the heart; he is the moon ever rising which makes rise the ocean of wisdom; he destroys misery born as the thousand rays of this miserable world; his form is auspicious; he is pure, worthy of consideration by the wise, benevolent—to his lotus feet, I attach myself!
3. That man-lion whose form is undivided joy and existence, adorned with the light of liberation, become manifest to shatter the forehead of the elephant of intoxicating delusion; whose praises were sung by Prahlāda, whose divine form came forth most emphatically from